

Germans from Russia: Online Resources for Volga Germans

Russia “How to” Guide, Intermediate Level: Instruction

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GOAL

You will learn:

- a brief history of Volga Germans.
- about the resources available through the Volga German Institute.
- how to use the Wolga Deutsche genealogical forum.

INTRODUCTION

In 1761, German-born Catherine the Great became empress of the Russian Empire. At the time of her rise to power, Russia was an underdeveloped agricultural land, lagging behind the development of Western Europe. Her solution was to invite her fellow Germans to come to Russia and cultivate the land. Catherine’s first formal invitation was extended in 1762, but it elicited little response, and a second manifesto was issued in July of 1763. German colonists were given special privileges, including free land, religious freedoms, and military exemption.¹

In the first five years following Catherine the Great’s invitation, nearly 8,000 families (27,000 individuals) left their German homelands in Hessen (Hesse), Württemberg, Wurttemberg and Pfalz (the Palatinate) to become colonists in Russia. After a difficult voyage across the Baltic Sea, Germans spent a few weeks to months in temporary settlements near St. Petersburg before traveling to their new homes along the Volga River in southeastern Russia. German immigrants founded 104 “mother” colonies clustered along the Volga River, two-thirds of which were formed by Lutherans, while Catholics accounted for the other third. As time went on, new “daughter” colonies were settled nearby to allow for the growth in population.²

As time progressed, conditions for Germans living in Russia steadily declined. Poor economic conditions, royal decrees revoking rights, famines and increasing anti-German sentiment pushed many Germans to leave Russia.³ Some Germans returned to their ancestral homelands

¹ Catherine Alekseyevna, “Manifesto of Catherine the Great,” translated from German to English by Ingeborg W. Smith, *Germans from Russia Heritage Collection*, Fargo, ND, www.ndsu.edu/grhc.

² Adam Giesinger, *From Catherine to Khrushchev* (Marian Press: Battleford, Saskatchewan, Canada, 1974).

³ Adam Giesinger, *From Catherine to Khrushchev* (Marian Press: Battleford, Saskatchewan, Canada, 1974); Arthur Kramer, “Migration of Germans to Russia,” *American Historical Society of Germans From Russia* (January 1985).

in Germany; however, the majority emigrated immigrated to North or South America. Russian Germans were farmers, so they tended to settle in rural agricultural areas. In the United States, most Germans from Russia settled in the states of Kansas, Nebraska, North Dakota, and Colorado, and as well as in the western provinces of Canada. Others ended up in Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, or and Uruguay.⁴

Those that stayed behind experienced harsh conditions. Following the 1917 Revolution and the subsequent formation of the Soviet Union, conditions for Germans reached an all-time low. In the 1930s, Volga Germans experienced a forced starvation inflicted by the Soviet regime. Millions of people perished in this famine. Later, in 1941, Stalin began deporting Germans living in Russia to labor camps in Siberia and Kazakhstan. Germans remained in exile throughout WWII and up until the 1990s. Following the fall of the Soviet Union, a large wave of German Russians left Siberia and Kazakhstan to return to their ancestral homelands in Germany.

Telling the story of your Germans from Russia ancestor can often be difficult because many records are still stored in Russian archives. There are, however, several resources available online to help you trace your German ancestors in the Volga region.

Knowing some details about the colony your Volga German ancestors lived in will help you better locate information about them. You may want to consult the following “How to” Guide before continuing:

- [Germans from Russia: Locating the Town with Websites and Gazetteers](#)

HOW TO

There are several different websites that can help you with your Volga German research. Read on to discover more about them!

Volga German Institute

The Volga German Institute’s mission is to “document the cultural manifestations of the German-speaking minority that lived along the Volga River in Russia from 1764 to 1941 . . . and their descendants.” The institute, managed by Dr. Brent Mai and several other academic advisors, offers valuable information about villages, surnames, notable individuals, and first settlers. Visit the website at volga.domains.unf.edu. This site is updated regularly, so check back often for more information regarding your colony or surname!

- Locations
 - Under the **Locations** tab at volga.domains.unf.edu, you will find an online gazetteer that can be searched a variety of ways: by colony type (mother/original, daughter, etc.), by place of origin, migration place, or alphabetically in the full gazetteer.

⁴ Gayla Aspenleiter, “Researching in South America,” Black Sea German Research, www.blackseagr.org; Michael M. Miller, Researching the Germans from Russia (Institute for Regional Studies, North Dakota State University: Fargo, ND, 1987), xvii-xix.

- You can also type the name of your colony into the search box located in the upper right-hand corner.
- Individual gazetteer entries provide useful information regarding the history of the colony, population data, surnames, links to other webpages, resources, and much more.
- Surnames
 - The **Surnames** tab directs you to a surname index of Volga Germans. Pages for individual surnames offer information about which locations colonists with this surname settled in. If you do not know which colony your Volga German ancestor came from, this might be a good place to look for possibilities.
 - Surname pages may also provide information about pre-Volga origins and the first settlers. If you can connect your family tree to one of these initial settlers, you can, in many cases, continue tracing the family into Germany.
- Biographies
 - In the **Biographies** section, you will find short biographies of notable Germans from Russia as well as information regarding famous individuals with Germans from Russia heritage.

Wolga Deutsche

Wolga Deutsche (wolgadeutsche.net) is a site dedicated to preserving the history of Volga Germans. The website, though in Russian, offers many useful resources, including a gazetteer, a photo collection, an online library, information about culture and history, and a forum where participants can ask and answer questions about various Volga German topics, including genealogy.

This “How to” Guide will only address how to use the forum, but feel free to browse the site to learn more about the history of Germans in the Volga.

If you do not speak or read Russian, this page can be translated using the Google Chrome browser. Simply right -click anywhere on the page and select the option **Translate to English**.

- To access the forum, select **форум** at wolgadeutsche.net (or, if you are using Google Translate, choose **Forum**) from the menu bar located on the top of the page. This will take you to the Local History and Genealogy Forum.
- If your browser did not already automatically translate the webpage for you, click on **Translation** on the right-hand side of the page and select your desired language.
- Within the forum are multiple groups with topics such as history, Soviet repression, genealogy, and culture/literature. You may read information posted in the forum without having registered; however, in order to ask or answer a question, you will need to register for an account. Registration is free but does require a valid email address. To register, click on **Регистрация (Registration)** located in the right-hand corner. Next, accept the terms of conditions (by clicking on the first of the two buttons underneath the terms) and then enter the information requested; also select your preferred language

(Язык). Note that it may take several hours to receive the confirmation email. After you have validated your email address you can now sign in to your account. Return to the main forum page and select **Вход (Entrance)** to log in. To post a question or comment, locate the desired page and select **ответить (reply)** at the top of the page. You can also click on the quotation marks (") located above a forum entry. For more information about using the forum, please see the **ЧаВО (FAQ)** section on the top of the main forum page.

- To locate the genealogy forum, scroll down and look for the heading **Genealogy**. Within the **Genealogy** group are three sub-groups: Поиск по фамилиям (search by surname), Поиск по немцким населённым пунктам Поволжья (search for Volga German Settlements), and Исследование родословных по другим регионам (кроме Поволжья) (Family History Research in Other Regions). Read about each of the three groups below.
 - **Поиск по фамилиям (search by surname)**: In this group, you can search for forum threads by surname. Selecting a letter will take you to a page of all surnames beginning with that letter. Surnames will not be in alphabetical order. Browse through the available surnames or search for a specific one by using the search box located in the upper right-hand corner of the screen.
 - **Поиск по немцким населённым пунктам Поволжья (search for Volga German Settlements)**: This group allows you to search by colony. Locate the colony your ancestors lived in and view surnames associated with that colony.
 - **Исследование родословных по другим регионам (кроме Поволжья) (Family History Research in Other Regions)**: The final genealogy group is for research in other areas, including the Black Sea, Caucasus, Poland, and Siberia, etc.

ADDITIONAL SOURCES

Additional online resources for Volga German research include the following:

- The Center for Volga German Studies – cvgs.cu-portland.edu
- American Historical Society of Germans from Russia (AHSGR) – ahsgr.org
- Germans from Russia Heritage Society (GRHS) – grhs.org
- Volga German Research – volgagermanresearch.wordpress.com
- Heimkehrlager Frankfurt/Oder: Remembering a Volga-German Refugee Camp – heimkehrlager.wordpress.com
- Centro Argentino Cultural Wolgadeutsche (Argentine Cultural Center of the Wolga Deutsche) – cacw.com.ar (in Spanish)
- Search for websites about individual colonies or surnames by using a search engine such as Google.

PRACTICE

Use the following scenario to help you put your newly newly-learned skills to the test:

Your Langholf ancestors were Germans who lived in the Volga region, but you don't know the exact colony they came from. Using the Volga German Institute website (volga.domains.unf.edu), what are some possible ancestral hometowns in the Volga or in Germany?

Visit volga.domains.unf.edu and from the main menu select **Surnames**. From the alphabetical list, select the letter **L**, and find Langholf in the alphabetized list. You can also search for the surname in the search box located in the upper right-hand corner of the screen.

According to the entry page for Langholf, individuals with this surname settled in the following colonies: Hummel, Kind, Susannental, and Zürich. The first Langholf settlers arrived in 1766 from Dörrenbach in the Rheinland.

ACTIVITY

Now, test your skills you have learned in this "How to" Guide. The Activity is a way to check your knowledge and let you know you've mastered the Guide! Click [here](#) to try out the Activity.

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